



PHOTO: REUTERS

LEAVING ALREADY? A limousine with blacked-out windows leaves the home of England and Manchester United superstar David Beckham in Sawbridgeworth near Harlow in Hertfordshire.

Homecoming or stopover?

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham arrived home from the United States on Saturday as speculation mounted that he could be a Real Madrid player in a matter of days.

Beckham, who had combined a promotional tour with a family holiday, flew into London's Heathrow airport with his popstar wife Victoria and young sons, Brooklyn and Romeo.

But the England captain gave a waiting pack of reporters and photographers a deft body swerve by skipping out of the terminal through a side entrance.

Beckham will only have a few days at home before flying to Japan for the start of another promotional tour that will also take him to

Malaysia, Vietnam and Bangkok. Ironically it is Beckham's huge popularity in Asia that has made him a target for Real, who are anxious to boost their standing in the region.

Real are due to play a friendly in Japan in early August and are aware of the enormous promotional spin-offs that would be generated if they could make that Beckham's first match in their famous white shirt.

Beckham's brief time back home is expected to be devoted to intensive discussions with his advisors on his future following Manchester United's decision to put their most marketable asset up for sale.

United have already agreed a fee with Barcelona presidential candidate Joan Laporta.

For that deal to have any chance of becoming reality, Laporta must win the presidential election on Sunday.

prospect of Beckham joining a club which will not be in the Champions League next season.

He could however be left with little choice if Real cannot reach an agreement with United on a deal.

Barca have tabled a cash offer worth an initial 25 million pounds, with increments built-in depending on Beckham's success.

Real in contrast are believed to be trying to do a deal which would involve one or more of Real's current squad going to Manchester.

Midfielders Geremi and Claude Makelele are the most frequently mentioned possibilities but neither of them are likely to generate much excitement among the Old Trafford faithful.

Selling Beckham will be sold more easily to United fans if Alex Ferguson spends the cash on securing the services of Raulinho

who plays with French side Paris Saint Germain, has also been linked with Real and there is increasing speculation that United could be forced to accept the Madrid giants terms for Beckham to ensure that they do not scupper the Raulinho deal.

Another potential spanner in the works is the continuing failure of Arsenal to agree a new deal with Patrick Vieira.

According to Saturday's Daily Mail, the French midfielder is on the verge of becoming available because Arsenal will not meet his salary demands.

Madrid are long-standing admirers of Vieira and would not balk at paying him what he wants, although the player himself insists he wants to stay at Arsenal.

The Brazilian World Cup winner,

Eyes on the future



REUTERS, Paris

Jacques Santini will take a peek into the future when the Confederations Cup begins on Wednesday -- handing opportunities to a new generation of French players.

In the absence of Zinedine Zidane, Claude Makelele, David Trezeguet and Patrick Vieira, the tournament will offer a chance for others to stake their claims for a place in Euro 2004.

Coach Santini will be particularly keen to find out whether Monaco's Jerome Rothen and Olympique Lyon striker Sidney Govou are strong enough to play at the highest level.

There could also be opportunities for AJ Auxerre's Olivier Kapo and Philippe Mexes.

"The Confederations Cup is the perfect opportunity to show I can play at international level," Govou said, as the defending champions prepared for their opening Group A match against Colombia in Lyon on Wednesday.



JACQUES SANTINI

"It will be a transition between last year's World Cup and the future."

The gifted Kapo has Robert Pires and Sylvain Wiltord ahead of him in the pecking order, while defender

Mexes has stiff competition from French cap record holder Marcel Desailly, William Gallas and Mikael Silvestre.

Benoit Pedretti could find an easier path into the team. The Sochaux midfielder appears to be the natural successor to Emmanuel Petit -- a player whose international appearances have been limited of late.

Pedretti already has four caps and he impressed with his strength and speed during France's 5-0 demolition of Egypt in April.

"I'm here to work and improve," said the 22-year-old Pedretti.

Fabien Barthez, often criticised at Manchester United, remains Santini's first-choice goalkeeper in front of Lyon's Gregory Coupet.

Nantes's Mickael Landreau seems to have won his number three battle with Bordeaux's Ulrich Rame and Paris St Germain's Lionel Letizi after being called up for the squad.

France have also been drawn in Group A with New Zealand and Japan, while Group B comprises Cameroon, Brazil, Turkey and the United States.

Moggi confident about Trezeguet

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus general manager Luciano Moggi has insisted David Trezeguet will not be leaving the Serie A champions this summer.

Last week Spanish first division club Valencia reportedly made a 45-million-euro (53-million-dollar) offer for the French international, but Moggi is very confident of holding on to his World Cup winning striker.

"Trezequet won't leave," Juve's transfer guru told Sunday's Corriere dello Sport.

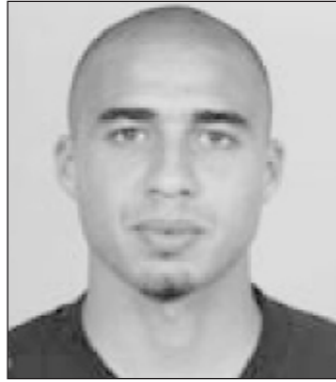
"He would be mad to leave such a grand club just to earn maybe another 50,000 euros (a year) more."

Moggi added that even if Valencia were to raise their bid substantially they would still not land the 25-year-old forward.

"If there is one club that David would never go to it really is Valencia," Moggi said.

Trezequet, who scored the golden goal in the Euro 2000 final against Italy, is one of Juventus' star players, helping the club to the league championship during the last two seasons.

The former Monaco marksman, who arrived in the summer of 2000, has scored 47 goals in his three years at the Turin club.



DAVID TREZEGUET

No Zidane, so what?



REUTERS, Clairfontaine

France must learn to live without Zinedine Zidane as the inspirational playmaker misses this month's Confederations Cup to help his club Real Madrid try to win the Spanish league title.

France coach Jacques Santini wisely decided to let Zidane miss the controversial tournament, avoiding the risk his key player may get injured as he did in a warm-up game for last year's World Cup.

If the Santini's decision can only be praised, it has raised many eye-brows and triggered the same questions about Zidane.

France did win the Confederations Cup in Japan two years ago without their injured number 10, and they did not look like they needed him when crushing Serbia & Montenegro 3-0 in a friendly last November.

The presence of Zidane in the final World Cup first round match last year did not stop the team losing 2-0 to Denmark, confirming their exit from the tournament.

"Zidane is not here. So what can we do?", said Santini on Saturday. "But he is not the only one missing. Patrick Vieira, Emmanuel Petit and David Trezeguet are not with us."

"I don't want to play down the



ZINEDINE ZIDANE

influence of Zidane on and off the pitch but it's not going to be the first time we will have to spare him."

If Santini truly admires the world's most expensive player, he is smart enough to avoid repeating the mistake of his predecessor Roger Lemerre by basing the team's strategy only on "Zizou".

To the 4-2-3-1 line-up preferred by Lemerre, Santini prefers a solid 4-4-2 in which the team plays as a whole rather than like an orchestra led by a conductor.

Santini is fully aware that Zidane is 30 years old and that one day France will have to do without him.

"When Zidane is here we play a 4-4-2 with him on the left wing and Sylvain Wiltord on the right. When he is absent, we still play a 4-4-2, now. So where is the difference?" said Arsenal midfielder Robert Pires.

In a way, Santini has dodged many problems by not picking Zidane.

First he has improved his relations with Real Madrid as many European clubs had blamed FIFA for scheduling the Confederations Cup so long after the end of most European domestic leagues.

It also gives him the opportunity to bring in several young players like Monaco's Jerome Rothen and Sochaux's Benoit Pedretti.

They all need to gain some experience, and the tournament is the perfect opportunity to do so.

Another reason for Santini's decision was that France will have to play a match every two days and even if Zidane had been able to start every game.

"Obviously, we will have to field the B team in one of the three matches of the first round," said Santini. "There is too little time between each of them."

Primera Liga Rayo shown no mercy

Football

AFP, Madrid

The humiliations of Rayo Vallecano continued on Saturday when the bottom club in the Spanish first division went down 2-0 at Valladolid.

Rayo have now gone 12 games without a win and their latest set back came against a team who have nothing left to play for this season.

Valladolid opened the scoring eight minutes after the break when on-loan Real Madrid striker David Arganzon ran onto a deep ball from the midfield which left the Rayo defenders stranded.

Eight minutes from time, Antonio Lopez got Valladolid's second from the penalty spot after rayo's Mauro Garcia had brought down Oscar Gonzalez.

At the other end of the table, the Spanish championship could be decided on Sunday.

Real Sociedad lead the league with 73 points and two games to go and have a one point advantage over Real Madrid.

However, standing in the way of the Basques' bid for their first title in 21 years is Celta Vigo and Sociedad have not won in Celta's intimidating Balaídos stadium in their last 13 league visits.

If Sociedad do manage to reverse recent history and win at Celta, then Real Madrid must do the same in their derby match at Atletico Madrid to ensure they remain in contention until the final weekend of the season.

Under Spanish league rules, if teams are equal on points at the end of the season then they are separated initially according to the results between the teams in question, and Real Sociedad have the advantage in head-to-head encounters with Ronaldo, Raul and the rest of Real Madrid.

Advantage USA!



AP, Lyon

The timing of the Confederations Cup could be just right for the United States.

The eight-nation tournament, which begins Wednesday, comes late in the season. Most of the national leagues -- with the notable exception of Spain -- are long finished and many players are on vacation.

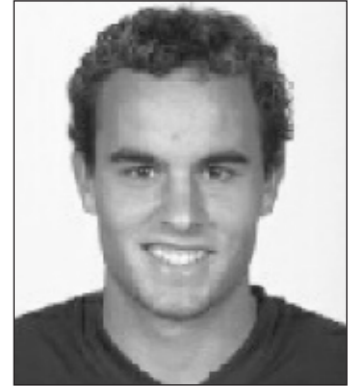
"That was an issue at the World Cup as well," said Landon Donovan, the star midfielder for the United States.

At last year's World Cup, which also began in June, players from France, Italy and Spain blamed the long season for tired legs and poor performances. France, the defending champion, failed to win a game or advance from its group.

At the same time, the United

States made a surprising run to the quarterfinals, stopped only by Germany, the eventual runner-up.

"It's the same thing now -- we are getting right into the best stage of our season," said Donovan, who



LANDON DONOVAN

plays for the San Jose Earthquakes of Major League Soccer.

"A lot of them (other teams) may be tired. But they are still good teams," he said.

The Americans have done well the two previous times they were invited to the Confederations Cup -- third both in 1992 in Saudi Arabia

and in 1999 in Mexico.

The United States is using the event as a test before qualifying starts next year for the 2006 World Cup in Germany. The Americans, like others, are going with a younger team.

Brazil is without Ronaldo, whose Real Madrid club is still chasing the title in Spain. France is without Zinedine Zidane, another Real star.

U.S. coach Bruce Arena thinks every team takes the tournament seriously, despite what the rosters look like.

"There are still very good players in every team," Arena said. "The team Brazil puts on the field against us ... will still be one of the best in the world."

The United States is in a tough group. It opens Thursday against Turkey, which finished third at last year's World Cup. Then comes Brazil, the five-time World Cup champion. The last group opponent is Cameroon, the African champion.

"There is not much pressure on us," Arena said. "The sport culture in the United States doesn't understand our sport. We have high expectations but not the public."

The super thief!

Football

AFP, London

England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson on Saturday praised Michael Owen as his team's supreme 'goal-thief' and insisted that his talismanic striker will get even better.

The 23-year-old Liverpool hitman took his international goal tally to 22 from 50 games in the 2-1 Euro 2004 win over Slovakia on Wednesday, but the Swede says there's even more room for improvement.

"In Sweden, we use the word 'maltjur' and Michael Owen is really a goal-thief as he's always there," said the England coach.

"He is 23 and should get better and better. He doesn't need to get better and better, but if nature is normal, that will happen."

Eriksson is also hoping that the injury problems which have dogged both Owen and his club teammate Steven Gerrard are a thing of the past.

"At the end of World Cup, Michael Owen struggled. But if you compare his second-half display

against Slovakia with how he ended the World Cup, of course his fitness levels are completely different," said the coach.

"It's better not to think about things like how it would have been if we had Steven Gerrard at the World Cup, although he's a complete player and one of the best midfielders you can find."

The key for Eriksson ahead of

next summer's Euro 2004 tournament - if England qualify - is that his players have enough time to rest after the end of the domestic season.

"Hopefully, if we qualify, this time we will have four weeks between the FA Cup final and

the start of the tournament, even if I doubt it will happen," sighed Eriksson.



MICHAEL OWEN

Albacete, Zaragoza promoted

Football

AFP, Madrid

Albacete and Real Zaragoza, second and third respectively in the Spanish second division, were assured of playing in the top flight next season after fourth-placed Levante lost 1-0 at Racing Ferrol on Saturday.

With three teams to be promoted and two games to go, Second division leaders Murcia have 76 points. Both Albacete and

Real Zaragoza have 70 points and a game in hand, while Levante stay on 62 points and cannot now get into the top three.

Albacete will be back in the Spanish first division after seven-year absence while Zaragoza's return has been swifter.

The 1995 European Cup Winner's Cup winners will only have been away from the first division for one term after being relegated last summer for the first time since 1978.



PHOTO: REUTERS

ALL THE BEST! Star Paraguayan striker Roque Santa with his bride Giselle Estefania Tavarelli (R) at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Asuncion after their wedding on June 14. Santa Cruz, 21, married Tavarelli, 19, sister of Ricardo Tavarelli, who is the number one goalkeeper for top Paraguayan club Olimpia and a substitute custodian for the national team.